



Brief n. 22/December 2020

Digitalized Media in Turkey And its impact on society

Hevin Deniz Celikbas



Con il sostegno di



**Fondazione
Compagnia
di San Paolo**

The Digitalized Media Era in brief

With the widespread adoption of personal digital computers, the Digital Revolution followed the Agricultural and Industrial revolutions, initiating what we call today The Information Age. This significant wave in human history has affected our lives in many aspects changing the education system, healthcare system, the way we work, the way we are informed, and even the skills we need to adopt. Media, a tool which has countlessly proven its power on masses throughout history, is undoubtedly one of the most impacted areas by the Digital Revolution. With the expansion of the scope of utilization of internet technologies, the printed press, as well as the entire conventional media, have lost its spotlight to digitalized media; new digital media outlets and social media platforms have opened up new pathways to opportunities for independent journalism and social media activism around the globe where people have free access to information and are able to express who they are and what they stand for.

While it has relatively less influence in some countries due to various reasons, including social, political, and economic factors, in others the data speak for themselves. The unique Eurasian country, Turkey, is one of the countries where the digitalized/social media has been impacting society by strongly affecting the country's general atmosphere due to its wide usage and effectiveness.

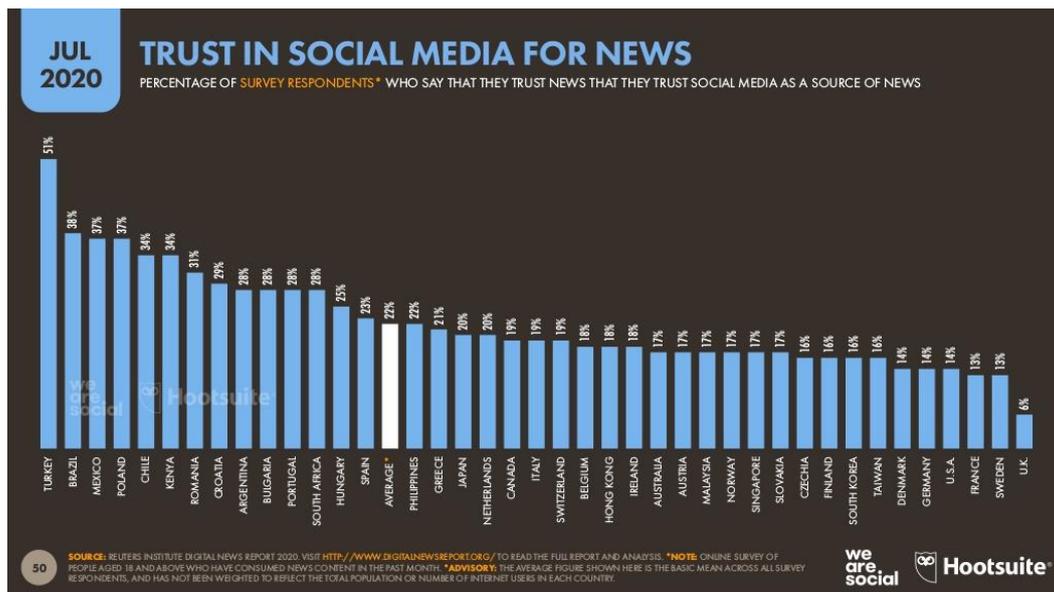
Social media in Turkey

As reported in the Global Digital Year Book¹ developed by We Are Social, Turkey has a total population of 83.88 million with 62.07 million active internet users and a penetration rate of 74 percent. As of January 2020, there are 54 million active social media users in Turkey. Social media use stands at 64 percent compared to the total population. As stated in the recent July Global Statshot Report², an average Turkish person spends 3 hours 05 minutes per day on social media platforms. Today, an ordinary Turkish citizen rarely gets informed by the conventional media; according to the same report, 58 percent of surveyed internet users in urban Turkey stated they use social media as their primary news source. As seen in the figure, Turkey leads the list of *Trust in Social Media for News* category. “The ruling party has strengthened its control of the Turkish (mainstream) media in recent years. Social and digital media are widely used and are important outlets for alternative and critical perspectives.”³

¹ Kemp, Simon (2020) Digital 2020, Global Digital Overview. We Are Social and Hootsuite. Available at: <https://wearesocial.com/digital-2020>

² Kemp, Simon (2020) Digital 2020, July Global Statshot Report. We Are Social and Hootsuite. Available at: <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2020/07/digital-use-around-the-world-in-july-2020#>

³ Newman, Nic (2020) Digital News Report. Reuters Institute. University of Oxford. Available at: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf



Source: Digital 2020, July Global Statshot Report. We Are Social and Hootsuite

The undeniable power of social media

“Since the Battle of Seattle in 1999, the first partly electronically organized social movement, Internet technologies developed as a new strategic platform for social movements. The developments of social media in the last decades raised the importance of this platform for social movements.”⁴ Social media's convenience and anonymity options have enabled people to influence one another to effectively and swiftly communicate, initiate and organize trends, protests, and new social movements that shape public opinion drastically. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube or online blogs with no (or less, in Turkey's case) government control and censorship have given people the chance to create their collective identities to form powerful social movements that would incite social transformations in society and historical changes in a country. “New information and communication technologies such as the internet and mobile phones have had clear roles both in starting new democratic processes in some countries and in entrenching them in others.”⁵ Arab Spring is a clear example of how one movement in one country instigated the other to attempt to start or reinforce democratic practices through the aforementioned channels, or Iran's 2009 elections demonstrated what happens when people are in possession of information infrastructure independent from the state.

Digital/Social media activism in Turkey

Despite being a topic of discussion amongst scholars whether social media determine social movements, it is indeed agreed it has a fundamental role in advancing communications between protesters and activists of any kind. The historic Gezi Park Protests in 2013 can be taken as “the starting point” of social media's “shine” in Turkey. After a dramatic video footage of police raiding on peaceful environmentalist protesters had been circulated online on social media and posted & shared by tens of thousands of people with outrage, the environmental protest evolved into a revolt on the streets against the existing government,

⁴ Hollenback and Zinkhan (2006) Consumer Activism on the Internet: The Role of Anti-brand Communities. Association for Consumer Research

⁵ Howard Philip N. (2011) Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy; Information Technology and Political Islam. Oxford University Press. p 3

protesting against the authoritarian tendencies, lack of human rights, freedom of expression & press and the like. “They have used Twitter to share information about how to survive the protests; Facebook sites provide news updates on the situation in occupied Gezi Park; while photographs of the protests have been shared on Flickr and Tumblr and video on sites such as YouTube.”⁶

Thus, the protests against the government became bigger and spread in the entire country. “In the Gezi Park movement, there was no centralized leadership; however, social media play a key role in the organization of the protests as the mainstream media give a lower profile of the demonstrations. Gezi Park protests are found to be similar to the Occupy movement and May 1968 events.”⁷ Digitalized media has not only been a useful tool for the protesters against the governments; it has also been an invaluable platform for leaders. Although the country's then Prime Minister Erdoğan called Twitter a “menace”, recognizing its role in the historic uprising, he himself has an account of 17 million followers on Twitter, where he frequently *tweets* to call on the Turkish nation and uses it as an *e-diplomacy* (Electronic Diplomacy, the use of digital technologies by nations for diplomacy purposes) tool.

It is worth mentioning that the Reuters Institute Digital News Report⁸ published in 2018 stresses that Turkey, by 65 percent, is at the top in the share of people concerned that openly expressing their political views online could get them into trouble with the authorities, whereas the average for all countries is 37 percent. These data come as no surprise as the number of prosecuted people because of their social media comments, posts, or even *likes* is at thousands, if not millions, in Turkey. Nonetheless, this does not *entirely* stop online activists or any ordinary Turkish social media user from utilizing these platforms to voice their support or concerns to influence the political or, for that matter, electoral environment.

Social media's influence on the electoral process

Social media's influence and outreach in electoral processes is yet another inarguable fact in the country. Today in Turkey whoever has a better impact on social media; whoever has a more effective, up-to-date, and engaging digital media strategy, has the upper hand when the election day arrives. In Turkey's 2019 municipal elections, Ekrem İmamoğlu (now mayor of Istanbul) and other opposition candidates for the metropolitan municipalities had immense social media support from pro-opposition accounts on social media. After the imprisoned former co-leader of pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) Selahattin Demirtaş expressed his support on Twitter to the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) in order to unite votes to overtake metropolitan municipalities from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), Kurdish people all around the country, from urban to rural areas, perhaps for the first time in their lives, voted for the predominantly Turkish Republican Party, making it a historical election, taking the largest metropolitan municipalities such as Ankara and Istanbul for the first time in a long time.

⁶ Hutchinson, Sophie (2013) Social Media Plays Major Role in Turkey Protests. BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22772352>

⁷ Ergun and Erdogmus (2017) The Impact of Social Media on Social Movements; The Case of Anti-Consumption. IGI Global.p 230

*Electronic Diplomacy (also known as Digital Diplomacy): Use of digital technologies by nations for diplomacy purposes.

⁸ Yanatma, Servet (2018) Reuters Institute Digital News Report, Turkey Supplementary Report. Reuters Institute. The University of Oxford. p 26. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-11/Digital%20News%20Report%20-%20Turkey%20Supplement%202018%20FINAL.pdf>

“We believe that İmamoğlu's appeal should be supported”, Demirtaş said in a *tweet* from his prison cell before quoting İmamoğlu's election slogan: “Everything will be beautiful”.⁹ “Digital media sustained protests well beyond what pundits have expected. Indeed, this new information infrastructure gave social movement leaders the capacity not only to reach out to the sympathetic audiences overseas but also to reach out to important constituencies: rural, conservative voters who had few connections to the urban chaos”.¹⁰ It is to be noted that social media does not only have the power of reaching out to those with access to social media but also has the power of “word of mouth”.

A voice for women

As another striking example of social media's *power of sanction* in the country, it is noteworthy that in recent months some conservative and government-backed powerful groups in Turkey repeatedly petitioned to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention (the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, signed in 2011 in Istanbul) on the basis that it encourages divorce and “immorality” in Turkish society. While feminist organizations and other civil society groups were reacting to this on social media platforms with the hashtag #IstanbulSozlesmesiYasatir (Istanbul Convention saves lives), yet another “femicide” (sex-based hate crime, broadly referred to as the “intentional murder of women”, usually perpetrated by men) occurred in the Mugla province of Turkey. A young Kurdish woman was brutally killed by her “jealous” boyfriend. This triggered widespread feminist protests around the country, bringing women together to show sisterhood and solidarity whilst voicing their concerns about the possible withdrawal from the Convention. The rage spread against the opposers of the Istanbul Convention and gender-based violence.

The murder of Pınar Gültekin sparked a massive online social media trend within and outside the country with the #challengeaccepted hashtag where women posted black and white photos of themselves nominating other women to post black and white photos (which was symbolic of seeing murdered women on the news every day). The movement became widespread to such an extent that world-famous Western celebrities joined the movement posting it to their millions of followers, amplifying the respective message. The magnitude of the pressure and rage from the people on social media was so high that President Erdoğan, the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, and other bodies of the government reassured people they would be following the legal proceedings of the Pınar Gültekin case with the utmost sensitivity.

While the so-called honor killings continue to be a deeply rooted issue in the country, the women of Turkey have finally found a platform to “occasionally” make their voices heard to the highest-ranking people through social media when they are abused or in danger. “Stout says social media is effective at bringing awareness to certain issues, but it needs more sustained action. It is just a starting point. Generally, once there is awareness, then you have to go and actually push your politicians to do something about it”.¹¹

In this regard, in Turkey it is safe to say that the level of people's rage is easily and often measured by the tweet count, the hashtags, and trending topics by the politicians or

⁹ Al Jazeera, Turkey (2019) Al Jazeera, News Agencies. Available at:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/21/turkey-pkk-leader-calls-for-neutrality-in-istanbul-mayoral-vote>

¹⁰ Howard, Philip N. (2011) Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy; Information Technology and Political Islam. Oxford University Press. p 8

¹¹ Stout, Christopher (2020) as cited in Granillo, Gabriel (2020) The Role of Social Media in Social Movements. Portland Monthly. Available at: <https://www.pdxmonthly.com/news-and-city-life/2020/06/the-role-of-social-media-in-social-movement>

lawmakers who can actually “do something about it”. “If a hashtag becomes a trending topic and manages to stay there for a long time, it influences public opinion. Hashtags, which determine public opinion, are taken very seriously by all segments of society. (Turkish) Politicians keep a close watch on these hashtags. They consider public expectations, and this can find an echo in real-life courts. In other words, social media courts lead to real courts”.¹²

A major push to social movements and the transformation of society

“Cyberactivism is no longer the unique provenance of isolated, politically motivated hackers. It is instead deeply integrated with contemporary social movement strategy and accessible to the computer and mobile phones with only basic skills; it is a distinguished feature of modern political communication and a means of creating the elan that marks social change”.¹³ Social media has integrated itself into every part of the society within reach of an ordinary Turkish citizen.

The impact of digitalized/social media on Turkish society is indeed undeniable in every aspect of the lives of some 83 million people. The reality of the country lays it bare that social media's and social media activism's power is a major element to the country's political, judicial, and electoral activities. This new kind of media has been shaping and inducing powerful social movements which, as a result, transform society in ways that cannot go unheeded.

Hevin Deniz Celikbas holds an MA in Cultural and Digital Diplomacy; Arts and Media for International Relations and Global Communication from the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Italy, as well as a BA in Western Languages and Literatures from Istanbul University. She worked for different United Nations' offices in Rome and Vienna.

¹² Ablak, Ersu (2020) Turkey’s Social Media Tribunals. Yetkin Report. Available at: <https://yetkinreport.com/en/2020/07/24/turkeys-social-media-tribunals/>

¹³ Howard, Philip N. (2011) *Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy; Information Technology and Political Islam*. Oxford University Press. p 11.